DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 102 RC 021 003

AUTHOR Hooper, H. H., Jr.; And Others
TITLE Concerns of Rural School Superintendents in Texas Regarding Inclusion As a Method for Serving Special Needs Children.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 8p.; In: Promoting Progress in Times of Change: Rural Communities Leading the Way; see RC 020 986.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Adoption (Ideas); Change Agents; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Inclusive Schools; Instructional Leadership; Mainstreaming; Program Implementation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *School Districts; Special Education; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS Change Facilitator Stages of Concern Questionnaire; *Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the concerns of rural school superintendents in Texas regarding the inclusion of special needs students in regular classrooms. The Change Facilitator Stages of Concerns Questionnaire (CFSoCQ) and a demographic data sheet were completed by 484 of the 708 rural superintendents in Texas. The CFSoCQ consists of 35 items reflecting stages of concerns that users, or potential users, of an innovation may have in the areas of awareness, informational, personal, management, consequence, collaboration, and refocusing issues. Nearly half of respondents were from school districts with enrollments of under 500 students, 59 percent of respondents reported that 6-15 percent of district enrollment were special needs students, nearly 93 percent were actively engaged with inclusion, and approximately 60 percent reported that inclusion was partially implemented in their school district. Questionnaire results indicate that superintendents expressed more concerns about issues related to awareness, information, management, and refocusing and less concern about personal, consequence, and collaboration issues. School district size or proportion of special needs students did not make a significant difference in superintendents' concerns about inclusion. However, the status of implementing inclusion generated significantly different kinds and intensities of concerns among superintendents. Superintendents did not perceive themselves as facilitators of inclusion implementation but rather, as playing a significant role in planning and oversight. (LP)

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Dr. H. H. Hooper, Jr.
Turner Community School District
Kansas City, Kansas
Dr. Anita M. Pankake
& Dr. Gwen Schroth
Department of Educational Administration
Texas A & M University-Commerce
Commerce, Texas

CONCERNS OF RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN TEXAS REGARDING INCLUSION AS A METHOD FOR SERVING SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

In 1977, Drucker noted that, "our society has in this century become a society of organizations" (p. 27). Contemporary society pursues many, if not most, of its goals by establishing various organizations. These organizations vary markedly in size, complexity, and purpose. Many factors influence the degree of success these organizations experience (Bennis & Nanus, 1985), but chief among these influencing factors is organizational leadership.

According to Drunker (1977), "organizations depend on managers [leaders], are built by managers [leaders], directed and held together by managers [leaders], and are made to perform by managers [leaders] " (p. 27). More recently, Koontz, O'Donnell, and Weihrich (1986) wrote that leading is one of the most important human activities. They went on to report that "managers at all levels and in all kinds of enterprises have the basic tasks of designing and maintaining an environment in which individuals, working together in groups, can accomplish selected missions and objectives" (p. 3). In fact, Deal and Peterson (1990) conclude that nothing will happen without leadership. From their perspective, it is essential that, "From someone -- or someplace -- energy need to be created, released, channeled, or mobilized to get the ball rolling in the right direction" (p. 4).

Bennis and Nanus (1985) assert that a leader "is one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change" (p. 3). To accomplish this, Kouzes and Posner (1987) suggest, "if someone is to lead us, that person must be able to stand before us and confidently express an attractive image of the future, and we must be able to believe that he or she has the ability to take us there" (p. 25). Formulating a picture of the future (visioning), helping others see that future as both possible and probable (sharing the vision), and coordinating the resources and responses necessary to move toward realizing that future (providing support) are among the most important responsibilities of organizational leaders. Leadership then is the additional influence up and beyond routine guidelines and directives.

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Most often the individual in the top leadership position of an organization is referred to as the chief executive officer, i.e., CEO. In public schools, the organizational leader is the superintendent and this individual serves as the board's executive officer (Blumberg, 1985). As the organizational leader, the school superintendent is obligated to provide direction to the board and others as they determine goals and objectives for the district. In doing this, Blumberg suggests that "superintendents are expected somehow not only to keep the organization running as smoothly as possible, but also to influence the character and substance of educational life in the systems in which they work" (p. 207). School superintendents then, as organizational leaders, are expected to behave in such a way that current operations go smoothly but also lead to a future that is purposefully different.

According to Wills and Peterson (1992), "the leadership role provided by the superintendent remains a critical linkage in translating educational reform legislation into change, improvement, or ample 'workshelf' compliance" (p. 141). Similarly, Usdan (1994) described the district superintendent and the local district as the linkpin of educational reform. He noted that superintendents are in a unique position to function in a proactive role in coordinating the many complex elements essential to wide spread educational improvement. "The educational leader, then, is in a position of shaping the organizational structure of the schools within the districts and the beliefs of the school community" (Thousand & Villa, 1990, p. 7).

Today's superintendents are faced with the ever increasing implications of responding to federal laws and civil rights court cases that have been initiated by state and federal governments (Hill, 1993). Superintendents realize that with the change of placing students with special needs in the regular classrooms will come resistance; the concerns of teachers, administrators and parents will have to be considered. According to Kelly (1974), "leadership is the performance of acts which assist the group in achieving certain ends" (p. 365). As the key leader in the school district in regard to the school's programs the superintendent's concerns can facilitate the nature of or discourage the school's personnel in achieving certain desired changes. In other words, the school superintendent's concerns influence the way those in the organization think, feel and behave toward change. Their concerns toward the impending changes involved in the inclusion of special needs children will probably influence the level of acceptance of others in his/her district.

As districts move toward serving special needs children in inclusive arrangements, knowing what concerns superintendents have allows the development of strategies for addressing them. Internal and external agents (ex., state department representatives, university preparation programs, consultants, intermediate units, special education cooperative representatives, etc.) can better serve district leaders if they know the kinds of concerns these leaders have. Gaining insight into rural school superintendents' concerns toward serving children with special needs in inclusive classrooms could help minimize problems in implementing this innovation at all levels of the organization. Given the less than

stellar history of successful implementation of planned changes in education information regarding implementation processes is crucial if the future is to boast of a greater number of successes.

Knowing an individual's stage of concern regarding an innovation is important information. It can guide facilitators of change in selecting the type of information, development activities, or support to provide the individual that will move him/her through the stages and ultimately to the routine use of the innovation. The results of this study offer some interesting perspectives regarding the implementation of an innovation in rural schools and the role which the superintendent plays in the implementation process.

The overall objectives of this paper are: (1) to provide information regarding the results of a study identifying the concerns of rural school superintendents in Texas toward serving children with special needs in inclusive classroom arrangements, and (2) to discuss the implications of these findings for change facilitators at all levels of the educational community. An overview of the study including population, guiding questions and the methodology are presented. Major findings, conclusions and recommendations for practice make up the major portion of the presentation.

An Overview of the Study

The study focused on rural school districts and the concerns (as measured by the Change Facilitator's Stages of Concerns Questionnaire) of their chief executive officers regarding the innovation of inclusion as a method of serving students with special needs. The major purpose of the study was to identify the concerns of rural school superintendents toward inclusion. The population for the study was the 708 superintendents of rural school districts in Texas, i.e., those districts with average daily attendance of 1,600 or fewer students. A survey packet was mailed to each superintendent. It contained a cover letter, a survey instrument (i.e., the CFSoCQ), a demographic data sheet, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

The instrument used was the Change Facilitator Stages of Concerns Questionnaire (CFSoCQ) (Hall, et al, 1991). Permission to use the CFSoCQ was secured from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas. The CFSoCQ is based on the seven stages of concern identified through the work of Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987). Hord, et al state that research has identified seven stages of concern that users, or potential users, of an innovation may have. These include: (a) Stage 0-Awareness Concerns, (b) Stage 1-Informational Concerns, (c) Stage 2-Personal Concerns, (d) Stage 3-Management Concerns, (e) Stage 4-Consequence Concerns, (f) Stage 5-Collaboration Concerns, and (g) Stage 6-Refocusing Concerns.

The CFSoCQ requires respondents to indicate what they think about a specific innovation by marking each of 35 items on a 0 to 7 Likert scale according to how

accurately the items describe the respondent's current feeling about the innovation. The 35 items represent seven stages of concern, five items for each stage. Raw scores for each stage of concern are converted to percentile scores and arrayed on a stages of concern profile. A demographic data sheet asking respondents to indicate: district enrollment (under 500, 501-999, 1,000-1,600, and over 1,600), percent of total enrollment who are special needs children (0-5%, 6-10%, 11-15%, 16-20%, and more than 20%), and the status of inclusion by implementation stage (note implemented, in planning stages only, partially implemented, and fully implemented) was also developed.

An exceptionally good return of 484 questionnaires (68%) was received. Raw data generated by the usable CFSoCQ's and demographic data sheets were scored, entered on a disk according to the protocol and mailed to the research analyst at the University of Texas - Austin. Total group and subgroups based on demographic categories were profiled by a computer program which displays raw scores, corresponding percentile scores, and graphs the respondent data according to each of the seven stages of concern. The data were analyzed to determine the overall concerns of rural school superintendents toward inclusion and what differences in superintendents' concerns by enrollment categories, in terms of special needs children as a percent of the total district enrollment, and in terms of the status of program implementation.

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations for Practice.

Of the 482 respondents who completed the demographic section of the survey, nearly half (236, 49.0%) were from school districts with an enrollment under 500 students. Just under 30%(28.4%) were from districts with and enrollment of 501-999; 93 (19.3%) were from districts with an enrollment of 1,00-1,600; and slightly over 3% (16) were districts identified (by Texas Education Agency) previously as rural schools, i.e., 1,600 or less ADA. There were 481 respondents who completed the data section concerning special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Slightly less than 60% (59.0%) were from districts with 6-10% or 11-15 % of special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Just over 30% (31.6%) reported 16% or more special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Finally, 481 respondents indicated the status of program (inclusion) implementation. When combining all three stages of implementation, 92.7% of the districts reported they were actively engaged with inclusion. The majority of the superintendents reported their districts as having inclusion partially implemented (60.9%). Only 7.3% reported "not implemented" as the status of inclusion in their districts and 28% reported the status of inclusion in their district as "fully implemented".

A summary analysis of data indicated that the overall superintendents expressed their greatest concerns at CFSoCQ Stages 0 (Awareness), 1 (Informational), 3 (Management), and 6 (Refocusing); less concern at Stage 2 (Personal), and much less concern at Stages 4 (Consequence) and 5 (Collaboration):

- Rural school superintendents as a total group (N=484) generated the following CFSoCQ Profile of Concerns regarding inclusion: Their most intense concerns were at Stage 0, moderately intense concerns at Stages 1, 3, and 6, less intense concerns at Stage 2 and few concerns at Stages 4 and 5. It is probable that the rural school superintendents gave little attention to inclusion but wanted to know more about the "how to do its" of implementation, were not concerned about working with others to facilitate its implementation, and were thinking about possible alternatives for it.

Importantly, the superintendents' concerns relative to their districts' status regarding the implementation of inclusion indicated some significant differences:

- Rural superintendents whose districts were at different stages of implementing inclusion (not implemented, planning for it or fully implemented) vary somewhat from the total group profile. Those in the planning category (N=18) wanted to know more about inclusion, the "how to do its" of implementation, and how to work with others effectively regarding its implementation. Those in the fully implemented category (N=135) were somewhat less interested in knowing more about inclusion, the "how to do its" of implementation, and were less concerned about alternatives to or replacements for it. Superintendents who reported their district to be not implemented (N= 293) were similar to the total group (N=484).

Considering both demographic and CFSoCQ data resulted in several conclusions. Among them were the following:

•School district size appeared to make no significant difference regarding the superintendents' concerns about inclusion.

•The proportion of special needs children in the total student population did not appear to make a significant difference regarding the superintendents' concerns about inclusion.

•The status of implementing inclusion appeared to generate significantly different kinds and intensities of concerns among superintendents.

According to the CFSoCQ developers, interpretation of the Stages of Concern Profile is limited to formulating hypotheses (Measuring Change Facilitator Stages of Concern, p. 43). Interpretation of the Stages of Concern Profile for all rural school superintendents (N=484) and the thirteen profiles of disaggregated data allowed the following hypotheses to be generated:

•Superintendents do not perceive themselves as facilitators regarding the implementation of inclusion.

•Superintendents see themselves playing significant role when the district is planning for the implementation of inclusion.

•Rural school superintendents appear to be meeting their leadership responsibilities regarding the implementation of inclusion. They are significantly involved during the discussion and planning stage and less so when implementation occurs. They maintain their oversight responsibility regarding the management function and keep their options open by considering alternatives to or replacements for inclusion.

Data from this study point to several actions that might be taken by rural school superintendents or others associated with this group:

•Many superintendents (135 of 484) reported their districts to have inclusion fully implemented. These individuals have likely learned some things that could be helpful to their peers who have not yet fully implemented this change. It would seem that these districts are a "rich" in-house resources as regards the implementation of inclusion. Several groups (Texas Educational Agency, Texas Association for School Boards, Texas Association of School Administrators, and others) should help these district disseminate their knowledge regarding the successful implementation of this change.

•Rural school superintendents should seriously consider using the materials available from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas to determine the profile of concerns shared by administrators and teachers regarding the implementation of inclusion or any other substantive change in their districts.

and,

•In building support for and confidence in future implementation efforts, superintendents should consider developing a district profile of successful implementation processes. This profile could be one feature of the district's internal and community public relations program throughout the change process.

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